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Senators Air Concerns About Race Tracks as DSPR Presents Updates

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During last week’s meeting of the Senate Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks, lawmakers received updates on various sporting related projects from Calvert White, commissioner for the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation.

Committee Chair, Senator Angel Bolques Jr. inquired about the status of St. Croix’s Randall “Doc” James Horsetrack. “I’ve been actually getting some phone calls regarding the racetrack on St. Croix. My sources have told me that they have not seen any permits for the company that is responsible for building out the track,” he told Mr. White.

“VIGL have submitted their modification application, as a matter of fact that application was submitted earlier this month,” The DSPR commissioner responded. Mr. White explained that the

application is currently under review at the Division of Coastal Zone Management at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

While making it clear that he was not seeking to cast blame on DSPR, Mr. Bolques complained that the slow pace of progress “is leaving the people of the Virgin Islands, horse owners and trainers in a state of limbo that is concerning for the status of horseracing.” Mr. Bolques expressed that horseracing has long been a cultural staple in the territory and that reviving the tradition remains dependent on the company tasked with the redevelopment of the track. Mr. White subsequently noted for the record that the company contracted to do the work has mobilized to the site, confirming that “their equipment is already at the location right now. In speaking to them they are just waiting for the permits. As they receive the permits they are ready to begin work.”

In September 2022 the Senate [approved](#) \$5 million in funding from the St. Croix Infrastructure Fund to support the construction of the Randall 'Doc' James Racetrack.

Senator Franklin Johnson raised questions about a funding request for equipment for the Clinton E. Phipps racetrack on St. Thomas. “There was some measures moved to put some \$150,000 to buy equipment for that track, and if we take government funds and buy equipment for that track, if we do, who will be utilizing these equipment?” he asked.

Having previously confirmed that DSPR currently had no employees stationed at the facility, the Mr. White elucidated, referencing the 2016 franchise agreement which resulted in VIGL taking over the track. According to Mr. White, “at that time I think I had about three or four employees working at the Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack. Those employees were either reassigned or resigned from the Department.” Mr. Johnson asked whether the department would have use for that type of equipment. DSPR did not, according to Mr. White, but he noted that if the racetrack reverted to DSPR, a budget increase would likely be requested to hire employees to be stationed at the facility to maintain and utilize the equipment.

Pressing further, the senator asked Mr. White whether he had requested the funding in question, to which the commissioner responded in the negative. Mr. Johnson then stressed that it was important to scrutinize such matters, asserting, “if the track is going to be run by a private company, it’s unfair that the government money is used to buy equipment that government employees are not going to be using.”

Apart from information on the horse racing tracks, Mr. White provided the committee with updates on several DSPR Projects. Improvements on the Emile Griffith ballpark and construction at the Joseph Aubain ballfield are both estimated to be completed by September 2023, according to the commissioner. The work undertaken at both facilities include renovations to fencing, press boxes, scoreboards and lighting. The Kerwin Terrace ballpark will also receive similar upgrades with contractors reportedly on site at present. Repairs are also being made to the concrete bleachers, roofing, restrooms, new fencing, umpire chairs, and light poles at the Doris Hodge Tennis Courts. Meanwhile, facilities on St. Croix such as the Isaac Boynes Ballfield, the Emile Henderson Basketball Court, and Rudy Krigger Sports Complex have been completed, Mr. White said.

According to the commissioner, on St. John, architectural and engineering design work for the St. John Recreational Center in Cruz Bay was about 90 percent complete, with a cost estimate of about \$10 million. Mr. White also reported that over in St. Croix construction was progressing on the Paul E. Joseph Stadium, while the Vincent Mason Pool project cost had doubled – from \$2.5 million to \$5 million – as the design of the foundation had to be reconsidered.

Mr. White confirmed that there were 51 DSPR projects being undertaken across the territory through assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, noting that “the Department has received over \$30 million in FEMA grant funding for hurricane recovery projects.”

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